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Maximising Asian ESL Learners' Communicative Oral English via Drama

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Abstract

This paper proposes that activities based on a variety of drama-based techniques could be valuable in giving Asian ESL learners opportunities to use communicative spoken English confidently and without restraint during their time in English-language-speaking countries. These learners often get anxious when in situations where they are required to speak in English. Fears about making errors related to grammar, fluency and clarity that might cause them to be embarrassed stand in the way of unencumbered speech output. In addition, cultural issues linked to voice-projection and body language can hinder oral interaction in English and hamper their motivation to speak. They are, therefore, deprived of much-needed speaking practice. I find that drama lets my students speak communicatively, free of the dread of constant correction, in a relaxed and enjoyable learner-centred environment that appears to help diminish their anxiety and inhibitions. As a result, their motivation to speak increases, leading to extended speech production.

Keywords: ESL, Asian students' traits, communicative oral English, drama variations

1. Introduction

Speaking is a skill that normally develops through regular and active usage. According to Kagan, "students to a large extent learn to speak by speaking" (1995, p. 3). As with any other skill, frequent practice leads to development over time. I have noticed that Asian ESL students who participate in wide-ranging interactive speech in English speak more fluidly over time, especially if their output is not monitored for structural or pronunciation accuracy. They display increasing confidence and motivation when allowed to speak freely, in stark contrast to the stress and anxiety associated with lessons dictated by linguistic correctness and clarity of speech. Their inclination to speak is enhanced and they participate at every opportunity that arises. The more they speak, the greater the spontaneity and fluency in their oral output, a cyclical pattern reflected in the simple diagram below.

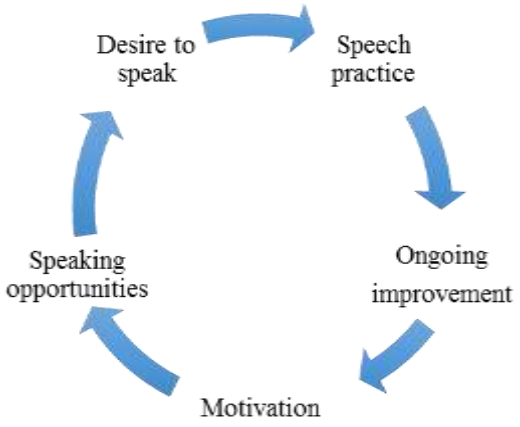

Fig. 1. ESL learners' oral output cycle

Such a positive outcome can be achieved by establishing a learning environment that encourages and reinforces a desire to speak communicatively. Drama appears to possess this capacity. The application of experiential, drama-based oral-English activities that encourage functional communication can, potentially, result in an increase in the quantity of their spoken English.

2. Asian ESL students' hurdles

There are various inter-related factors that result in limited or unnoticeable improvement in the spoken English of Asian ESL learners in English-speaking countries. They are as follows:

a. There is a general preference for a 'reflector' learning style (Barron & Arcodia, 2002) that causes them to be rather passive during speaking lessons.
b. Asian cultures in countries like China, Japan and Korea advocate respect for, and dependence on, teachers. Lessons are largely teacher-centred and learner-participation is limited. Such an expectation on the part of learners continues while they are overseas.
c. Sometimes, the fault lies with how a language lesson in the host country is conducted. According to Felder (1995), lessons "in which all students are relegated to passive roles, listening to and observing the instructor and taking notes, do little to produce learning." (p. 24).
d. Their speech tends to be peppered with grammar and pronunciation errors. The resultant anxiety they experience can hinder their participation in oral interaction (Liu & Jackson, 2008).
e. This is exacerbated by "hidden censorships … which exclude certain individuals from communication" (Bourdieu 1977, p. 648). These censorships could be said to be self-imposed, arising from learners' reactions to a number of factors, including:
    i. Ineffective and de-motivating teachers;
    ii. The fear of being mocked by native speakers (Block, 2007) and by those of similar ethnic backgrounds whose spoken English is better than theirs because they were born or grew up in English language environments (Lam, 2004);
    iii. Victimisation through 'racialising' (Miller, 2003);
    iv. Concerns about their accents being considered inferior by native speakers (Fraser & Kelly, 2012);
    v. Culture shock;
    vi. Language shock caused by local accents and dialects that are difficult to understand (Marr, 2005).
f. Asian ESL learners often fear rejection and exhibit low self-esteem (Stern, 1980). Under such circumstances, there is a danger of learners becoming inhibited and reluctant to participate in oral interaction with native and native-like speakers, preferring instead to spend most of their time with students who are culturally similar to them (Xiao & Petraki, 2007). It provides them with a comfort-zone to offset the linguistic and cultural uncertainties and concerns linked to the unfamiliar environment they find themselves in. This behaviour is a natural part of the 'herd mentality' of humans everywhere, be they Asians, Westerners, Middle-Easterners, or Africans. Such a mindset is unlikely to create scope for immersion in oral interaction in English. As a consequence, there is a danger of their missing out on learning opportunities that could be of benefit to them (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

The more they stay in their cocoons, the less the scope for speaking opportunities. If left unrectified, such circumstances could result in loneliness and a loss of status, leading ultimately to failure in their studies (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998).

3. Drama helps increase oral output

ESL speaking classes that emphasize accuracy, skill-getting (rather than skill-using), and repetitive practice of isolated utterances that have limited relevance to real-time and real-world communication, can be dull and un-motivating. By way of contrast, learner-centred classes that provide incentives for speakers to participate in experiential activities based on communicative and unconstrained oral interaction are generally considered by students as being more interesting. Drama is one such experiential element that has human communication at the core of its existence, largely in the form of speech output. It is a holistic process in which the mind, body and emotions collaborate in completing a task or project. The following are some of its inherent characteristics:

Communicative → Meaningful interaction that can lead to communicative competence;

Error-acceptance → Not rigidly focused on structural accuracy;

Subjective → Flexible negotiation of meaning;

Learner-centred → The learner experiments with English;

Learner autonomy → The learner has a say in the makeup of lessons and the teacher acts as a facilitator;

Participation-based activities → Learners are not just passive observers;

Focus on oral interaction → Speaking is central;

Emphasis on fluency → Speech is not grammar-based;

Information gaps → Responses are not restricted by predictability;

Linked utterances → No isolated utterances.

These characteristics help remove obstacles to unrestricted speech. They put the spotlight on the learner with the teacher expediting learning as a constructivist-inclined guide on the side rather than a transmittal-fixated sage on the stage (King, 1993). There is long-term growth through self-initiated learning that creates many opportunities for learners to use communicative language. With various shackles removed, learning becomes enjoyable, thereby helping to reduce anxiety (Stern, 1980), and stimulating the production of greater speech. Satisfying learning creates "heightened

subsequent interest in the subject matter, enhanced confidence in the learner, and improvements in the actual learning process" (Lepper & Cordova, 1992, p. 203). Learning can improve with drama because it has the capacity to increase speaking time (Kagan, 1995; Long & Porter, 1985) in an integrated and holistic way (Smith, 1984), thereby fostering speaking skills (Ashton-Hay, 2005; Di Pietro, 1987). Spoken English multiplies, accompanied by familiarisation with the paralanguage and expressions of the language (Stern, 1980).

An important ingredient of drama is that it promotes on-going oral discussions between participants. For example, when my ESL students prepare for a performance, there is evidence of informal communicative chatter that is not restricted by the demands of accuracy. The relaxed environment results in free-flowing English and, as Kao and O'Neill (1998) suggest, such conversations and discourse play a crucial role in improving their use of the language. Humdrum speaking lessons based on prefabricated teaching materials and which centralise teachers' roles are replaced by experiential learning that incorporates freedom to use English communicatively, warts and all. While the former methodology hinges on learners' extrinsic motivation (having to do something in order to avoid negative outcomes), the latter operates on intrinsic motivation (doing something because one likes it). Intrinsic motivation generally provides greater room for autonomy. Taking Reeve, Bolt and Cai's (1999) view that autonomy during oral interaction increases learning and motivation, it could be said that autonomous learners internalise speech forms effectively and are motivated to speak in an environment conducive to unencumbered speech. Both forms of motivation in relation to speaking tasks can be represented as follows:

Extrinsic motivation	Intrinsic motivation
Unstimulating materials & environment plus lack of autonomy in speech output	Stimulating tasks & learning environment plus autonomy in speech output
⇓	⇓
Task done out of necessity (limited enthusiasm)	Task done because it is enjoyable (high enthusiasm)
⇓	⇓
Restricted oral output, isolated utterances	Wide-ranging, interactive speech production

Fig. 2. Motivation in non-communicative & communicative speaking

Familiarising themselves with the new identities on a regular basis might result in their becoming increasingly more relaxed when dealing with the bona fide world of the foreign culture outside the classroom, thus giving them more opportunities to use English interactively. Regular episodes involving intrinsically motivated speech production can assist them to become familiar with the nuances of English, both from linguistic and cultural perspectives. Familiarity with correct forms of English within the environs of the culture of that language may help reduce their anxiety and self-consciousness and give them confidence to experiment with the target language, allowing them to "test boundaries and cultural sensitivities as well as their linguistic progress in the target language" (Brash & Warnecke, 2009, p. 102). Gambits or conversation-starters (Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim & Thomson, 2010) that illustrate English language culture play important roles in augmenting empathy for the culture and, by association, the language. The increase in the quantity of oral output provides greater scope for work on their proficiency. Drama also caters for 'quality repetition' (Gilbert, 2008, p. 31). For example, rehearsals for end-of-term performances involve repetitive use of the forms and patterns of English in the process of memorising lines. These structures are not only internalised but also used in new ways in the future (Erdman, 1991). They embody formulaic or ritualistic language that may be able to enhance fluency through repeated practice by the learner, (Tognini, Philp & Oliver, 2010).

Brash and Warnecke (2009) suggest that drama permits ESL learners to use English contextually without fear of constant correction by the teacher, thus making them more confident and motivated. Jones (2007) is of the opinion that "Some students feel less inhibited if they have a role to play, and can escape from "being themselves" for a while" (p. 32). The fear of loss-of-face and embarrassment due to mistakes declines because the focus is not on them but on the persons they are pretending to be. Fiction serves as a security blanket that helps them face unnerving situations (Brash & Warnecke, 2009). Learners experimenting with stage-identities may find themselves becoming more relaxed and confident in relation to the language they are learning. Their true selves are concealed behind the 'masks' of non-permanent identities that could help them cast aside inhibitions they may otherwise possess. The greater the 'disinhibition' or ego-permeability (Schumann, 1986), the more likely it is that there will be increased oral output and, thereby, learning. Scenes involving "topic-nomination, turn-allocation, focusing, summarising, and clarifying" (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 210) while conducting "discourse, transaction, negotiation, explanation and inquiry" (Jones, 1982, p. 7) result in greater oral output, thereby creating opportunities for improvement in the TL.

Drama also promotes a learning environment that inspires learners to experiment with native-speaker speech styles. For example, imitating the speech and body rhythms of native-speakers of English may help them handle communication issues more effectively (Gassin, 1990). Even though trying to sound like native-speakers may be an unrealistic goal (Derwing & Munro, 2005), there is something to be said about learning how to perform with an accent. Perhaps it can create a sense of affinity with native-speakers because they sound like them. It might also make them easier to understand and this might help increase their confidence and motivation to speak in English. Acting helps learners articulate better (Smith, 1984) and acting with an accent lets them use a standard native-speaker style of speech while experimenting with English-speaker identities. Once they start getting comfortable with the process, they are likely to open up and might even try to sound and behave like the characters they represent. Any element of success in such ventures can only boost their confidence and encourage them to use spoken English more actively.

4. Drama variations

Drama can be used in a variety of ways in the ESL classroom to promote increased oral output.

4.1 Playback theatre

This form of theatre promotes intercultural empathy in which actors enact the experiences of their audience by interacting with them. In a classroom situation, learners can take turns as actors and the audience. The content of the performance is highly engaging and participants are motivated to interact orally with each other. There is a "mindfulness of others" (Feldhendler, 2007, p. 43) as participants build a collective identity while applying listening, speaking and body language skills. Oral output expands and develops in the process of constructing the identities of the audience.

4.2 Process drama

Another strategy that achieves similar outcomes is process drama. It promotes learning through the facilitative tension that arises from cultural differences (Tseng, 2002). Cultural taboos appear to matter less when students take on stage identities and, through them, say and do things they would not, ordinarily, in real life (Heath, 1993). The process of integrating and becoming familiar with a target-language culture motivates them to be more proficient in the target language (Stern 1980).

4.3 Commedia dell'Arte

Another avenue is Commedia dell'Arte, a 16th century form of Italian improvisational theatre, which provides "an oral context that fully exploits paralinguistic and non-verbal meaning" (Henke, 1996, p. 223). The stock characters in this form of theatre use codified body-language to express admonition, salutation or advice. By adapting these elements of Commedia dell'Arte, learners can display oral output and gestures typical of stock native-speaking characters like the local police-officer, bar-tender or postal-clerk. They are less uncomfortable about modifying their body language to suit the characters they are playing because their true identities are not being judged.

4.4 Strategic Interaction

Strategic Interaction, in which roles develop and speech increases exponentially in open-ended scenarios (Di Pietro, 1987), is yet another method that creates increased speech. In enacting the scenarios, participants generate on-going, ever-increasing interactive verbal communication based on evolving information and new developments. Imbued with a sense of power and autonomy to speak in an unrestricted fashion, they ignore the constraints of bookish language and produce communicative speech. Although their oral output is far from accurate, it is a price worth paying because the shackles have been removed.

5. Some communication obstacles and how drama can help

Drama has the potential to deal with issues related to fluency, clarity, voice-projection and kinesics.

5.1 Fluency and clarity

Guiora (1972) identifies speaking as the most challenging of the four language skills and this is particularly relevant to international students have major problems with clarity and fluency issues in the target language (Hellestén & Prescott, 2004; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zhang & Mi, 2009). A lack of fluency, which varies from speaker to speaker (Wood, 2004), is a major hindrance standing in the way of a learner's oral output. There are a number of definitions (Koponen & Riggenbach, 2000) but fluency could generally be described as speaking a language correctly, smoothly and at the right pace.

ESL learners often struggle to make themselves comprehensible or intelligible. Their accents, which take time to decipher (Munro & Derwing 1995), may be a source of irritation to native speakers (Fraser & Kelly, 2012). The lack of fluency could be due to limited knowledge and control of the structure of the target language and the speed with which it is accessed (de Jong & Perfetti, 2011). Difficulties associated with clarity of speech could result in " a reluctance in attempting to pronounce English words for fear of failure in front of the evaluative eye" of native speakers (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004, p. 346). Unfortunately, this results in their missing out on various opportunities to practise their speech with native-speaking classmates and the wider community, thus hindering the development of fluency and clarity. These students can benefit from effective training in speaking but Rossiter et al (2010) are of the view that, "… many ESL classes offer little or no explicit, focused instruction on the development of oral fluency skills" (p. 585). A learner-centred and communicative-based approach like drama gives learners increased opportunities to speak (Gill, 2013) and, in the process, provides them with practice in English as they strive for fluency and clarity. Their self-esteem,

confidence and motivation increase as a consequence of using what they already know of the target language "over longer stretches of discourse that resemble sustained authentic interaction" (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 43). The spontaneous speech produced may be unsound but "the lack of pressure to produce "correct" speech promotes confidence and fluency" (Kao & O'Neil, 1998, p. 24). Fluency develops by virtue of the learners wanting to be understood in the target language (Davies, 1990). There is a feel-good factor associated with the progressively larger chunks of speech they produce, with the possibility that greater fluidity and comprehensibility will start developing.

5.2 Voice-projection

Some cultures frown upon talking loudly at inappropriate times. To Filipinos, Thais and Japanese, soft voices indicate politeness and good upbringing (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009) whereas for the Chinese, "A low tone of voice is preferred" (Goh, 1996, p. 111). Students of these backgrounds tend to be softer and less expressive in formal interactions or during public presentations like prepared speeches. In interactions with loud and boisterous native speakers, they may find themselves at a disadvantage because louder voices tend to dominate softer ones (Charfuelan, Schröder & Steiner, 2010). As a result, their oral contribution might progressively decrease. By taking on the robust characteristics of native speakers of English on stage, they can be trained to talk with stronger voices. Once they are comfortable with this, they may be less reluctant to participate in noisy verbal encounters inside and outside the classroom, thereby increasing their oral output in engagements with various personalities.

5.3 Kinesics

Body-language is an important component of communicating with others. By being kinetically communicative, we draw attention towards ourselves while a lack of physical expression means we go unnoticed. Many ESL learners studying overseas belong to the latter category. Examples are East Asians, who are not very expressive with their bodies and faces and make limited eye contact (Beamer & Varner, 2008) and Africans, Asians and Latin-Americans (Wolfe, n. d.) who are also averse to excessive eye contact, out of respect for those they speak with. Samovar et al, (2009) find the same to be true of the Japanese. Eye-contact is generally a given in many English-speaking countries, and learners who are uncomfortable with such behaviour have to try to come to terms with it. They need to be trained and this can be done through role-plays and improvisations with actors taking on identities displaying confrontationist and aggressive traits, for example. These measures incorporate physical and psychological interaction that can help participants convey their thoughts and emotions in a less circumscribed fashion. Regular exposure to such ventures can add animation and expressiveness to their output (Gill, 2004).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Hurdles that Asian ESL learners face when they are overseas can result in insufficient oral English output. Coming from educational and cultural backgrounds in which lessons are normally teacher-centred, they tend to exhibit passivity in class. The problem is exacerbated by, among other issues, culture-shock, local accents, perceived racism and discrimination, fear of losing face due to grammar errors, their accented English, and the inability to speak English clearly. As a result of such concerns, they prefer to isolate themselves from the host-nation culture and keep the company of those from their own language and national backgrounds. The upshot of such a conundrum is that they get limited opportunities to speak in English and, therefore, miss out on the practice they desperately need. Consequently, their oral English skills do not develop satisfactorily. In order to reduce or, better still, remove their reluctance to use oral English actively and productively, an intrinsically motivating language learning environment needs to exist. Drama creates an atmosphere conducive to communicative speech-production through imagination, with learners experimenting with, and internalising crucial aspects of, their target identities and the target language within the confines of a fictional community. The oral medium associated with drama in its various forms provides learners with avenues to indulge in meaningful and generative discourse in their roles. "Dialogue is at the heart of the encounter with the role, and purposeful response is implicit in the situation" (O'Neill, 1993, p. 56). Drama represents cooperative group-work, and cooperative learning generates more spoken language (Kagan, 1995) because of increased speaking time (Long & Porter, 1985) as the participants construct their adopted and transitory identities and create a make-believe community in a low-risk, enjoyable and stimulating learning environment. The enjoyment and stimulation is linked to the fact it is a learner-centred strategy based on communicative rather than structure-bound speech. Speech is not restricted to isolated and grammar-based utterances but on wide-ranging and interactive communication which is contextual in nature. In essence, drama is a truly comprehensive and holistic way of learning because the mind, body and emotions all work in unison. There is a certain everyday humanness about it that can help Asian ESL learners become more confident and enthusiastic about using spoken English communicatively. Through regular speech output, they may, in time, be able to speak English comfortably.

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